

ESTABLISHING ELDERS IN CROSS-CULTURAL COMMUNITIES

by

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ABSTRACT

Elders have held places of leadership among God's people since at least the days of Moses. Today, elders help pastors lead a congregation through many roles. The office of elders is invaluable to a pastor and his church. Now consider a white pastor who is called to serve in a cross-cultural community. He does not know what he does not know about this new culture and needs help. Elders from that culture will be a precious piece of his ministry. The following thesis describes how a white pastor might establish elders from another culture to help him build the church of Christ in his new community.

A study of the word "elders" in the Bible shows there is no prescription about how an elder can serve as a leader with the pastor. Advice from African American, Hispanic, and Hmong leaders teaches cultural considerations for white pastors trying to establish and work alongside cross-cultural elders. Advice from white pastors who have served in cross-cultural congregations teaches about having an open mind and heart to listen to and consider the input and leadership of elders from another culture. The thesis closes with applications (drawing from what Scripture says about elders and the advice from both cross-cultural leaders and white pastors) for a ministry which seeks to establish cross-cultural elders for building up the kingdom of God.

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1. LITERATURE REVIEW

The literature reviewed for this thesis can be categorized into three categories: church leadership, cross-cultural church leadership, and biblical elders. On the topic of cross-cultural church leadership, as well as church leadership in general, the majority of literature focuses on congregational leader development in North American churches.¹ The literature concerning the nature of biblical elders spoke about the context surrounding elders in the Bible, but not necessarily its relationship to ministry today.

The books on church leadership wrote about an “Incarnate Leadership”² model. They described this model as developing leaders like Christ did. Without doubt Christ is an excellent model to follow. However, the way books like *Building Leaders* (Aubrey Malphurs and Will Mancini)³ use Christ’s model to describe leadership seems similar to recruiting and training future pastors. Christ trained apostles to take his gospel to the world much like pastors and missionaries today. The subject of lay elders as cultural guides and fellow leaders with a pastor was not discussed. *Incarnate Leadership* (Bill Robinson)⁴ discussed the incarnational model from the perspective of pastors and other leaders – they should lead just like Christ did. That is sound advice, but these books did not speak about establishing elders to lead with the pastor. So

¹ The books teach about training and instruction to develop leaders in the Word. Some books like *The Hispanic Challenge*, *Leading Cross-Culturally* and *Building Leaders* also discuss recruiting leaders for the church. But these and other books do not discuss the valuable help an elder as a cultural guide can be to a pastor working cross-culturally.

² When church leadership books talk about “Incarnate Leadership,” they mean using Christ as an example when leading. Bill Robinson stresses that church leaders should first seek to be imitators of Christ before seeking to be good leaders (*Incarnate Leadership*, 19-20).

³ Aubrey Malphurs & Will Mancini, *Building Leaders: Blueprints for Developing Leadership at Every Level of Your Church* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Book House Co., 2004).

⁴ Bill Robinson, *Incarnate Leadership: 5 Leadership Lessons from the Life of Jesus* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan Publishing House, 2009).

what about a church that has a pastor who needs several elders to help him lead now? The “Incarnate Leadership” model for training did not touch on elder leadership with a pastor.

Leading Cross-Culturally (Sherwood G. Lingenfelter)⁵ and *The Hispanic Challenge* (Manuel Ortiz)⁶ speak about the importance of communication between cross-cultural church leaders in order to build trust so as to work for Christ. They both offer insight concerning training leaders who are from other cultures and what pastors should consider when communicating to their leaders.⁷ *Ministering Cross-Culturally* (Lingenfelter & Marvin K. Meyers)⁸ provides guidance concerning the tensions that might occur between different cultures and how a church leader might be able to ease these tensions.⁹ It discusses how a pastor can recognize these tensions and how he can communicate to other cultures in light of the tensions. These three books are valuable to understanding church leadership cross-culturally. However,

⁵ Sherwood G. Lingenfelter, *Leading Cross-Culturally: Covenant Relationships for Effective Christian Leadership* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2008).

⁶ Manuel Ortiz, *The Hispanic Challenge: Opportunities Confronting the Church* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1993).

⁷ For example: Lingenfelter explains that accountability for leadership will differ among cultures. Because of this there will arise conflict about accountability and trust issues might spring up as well. “As a consequence, building a community of trust is always a major challenge for cross-cultural leadership” (*Leading Cross-Culturally*, 21).

⁸ Sherwood G. Lingenfelter & Marvin K. Meyers, *Ministering Cross-Culturally: an Incarnational Model for Personal Relationships* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Book House, 1986).

⁹ Lingenfelter talks about how a pastor should seek to become a “150 percent person” (*Ministering Cross-Culturally*, 24-26). What he means is that a white pastor could never become 100 percent African American or 100 percent Hispanic. But a pastor should seek to be 75 percent white and 75 percent of the culture he serves. This sounds like good advice. However, leaders from other cultures advised that a white pastor should just be himself, while having an open mind and loving heart for ministering to other cultures. Another thing to consider would be: How can a pastor become a 150 percent person in the first place? Lingenfelter and others do not touch on the value of having elders from another culture lead with the pastor to teach him about their culture, how to speak to their culture, how to act around their culture, and how to share the gospel with their culture. This is a key aspect lacking from literature regarding cross-cultural leadership in churches.

they do not speak to the situation of a pastor in a new cultural setting, who needs to start at the beginning and find elders.

A Theology of Church Leadership (Lawrence Richards and Clyde Hoeldtke)¹⁰, *The Elders* (R. Alastair Campbell)¹¹ and *40 Questions about Elders and Deacons* (Benjamin L. Merkle)¹² dealt with early church organization and structure as well as identifying who elders were in the Bible. *The Elders* was helpful in describing how elders in the Old Testament were representatives of their tribes, clans, and families. It also attempted to explain the leadership of elders in the first century Christian house-churches. However, these books did not apply the descriptions of elders in the Bible to elder ministry today. A few articles from the Wisconsin Lutheran Seminary essay file online (<http://www.wlsessays.net/>) do speak about elders' roles in congregations today. Yet there were no essays dealing with elders from another culture and how their roles might be different from "traditional" elder roles today.

One aspect of ministry the literature stressed was the need for more than one leader in ministry. The books and essays displayed the need for other leaders to help guide the mission and work of a church. However, the present literature about church leadership does not deal with a ministry model involving a pastor leading a church along with his elders (much less a pastor identifying, training, and working with elders from another culture). One thing missing from the

¹⁰ Lawrence O. Richards & Clyde Hoeldtke, *A Theology of Church Leadership* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan Publishing House, 1980).

¹¹ R. Alastair Campbell, *The Elders: Seniority within Earliest Christianity* (Edinburgh, Scotland: T&T Clark Ltd., 1994).

¹² Benjamin L. Merkle, *40 Questions about Elders and Deacons* (Grand Rapids: MI: Kregel Publications, 2008).

reviewed literature is the roles of elders in a cross-cultural church with a white pastor. Once elders are established, how can a church and its pastor designate leadership roles for the elders?

Churches in the Wisconsin Evangelical Lutheran Synod (WELS) have used the ministry model of a pastor who leads the church with his elders. WELS has pastors who are theologically trained in the doctrines of Scripture. These pastors work together with elders to train and equip them for leadership in the congregation. Such a model was not used in the literature reviewed above. For that reason, this thesis seeks to create a helpful guide for white pastors who want to establish cross-cultural elders in their congregation so they can reach their community and lead their congregation in a way which represents the other culture. Because of the lack of literature revolving around the pastor and his elders from another culture, this thesis draws conclusions based on advice from experienced church leaders. It draws on the advice of people from different cultures who have served as leaders with white pastors as well as advice from white pastors who have served with elders from other cultures. The advice from church leaders has been considered in light of a study on how the word “elders” is used in Scripture in order to formulate a guide on how to establish elders in a cross-cultural community.

This research has led to the following conclusions regarding a white pastor with elders from another culture: Elders from another culture help the pastor lead according to the needs of that culture. Cross-cultural elders can serve in roles according to the context and culture of the church. Establishing a leading relationship with elders from another culture involves open communication centered on the truths of the Bible and unity in Christ. There are many things pastors can learn from cross-cultural elders regarding how to contextualize the presentation and application of the gospel and a congregation’s ministry for another culture.

These conclusions are applied at the end of the thesis to provide something missing from literature regarding cross-cultural church leadership today: a helpful guide to help pastors who are called to serve a culture of which they are not familiar. The guide seeks to give advice gained from experienced leaders and pastors to inexperienced pastors so they may “start from scratch.” The guide is meant to help pastors establish elders from other cultures to lead in the church and evangelize the community around the church.

2. “ELDERS” WORD STUDY

Growing up, many church children are a little confused about who exactly their congregations’ elders are and what they do. I once heard a child say, “Noah’s dad is only 35, but he’s the head of the elders!” Yes, in churches today, the elders are more than just “old guys.” The traditional roles of elders in most WELS churches include the following: help with member visits, visit delinquents, discuss church matters, and attend meetings. In summary, elders are leaders in the church. The roles listed above are all good roles to be considered for elders. However, a pastor should not assume that those are the only responsibilities elders can perform. He should not assume that if one or more of those roles are left out, the man cannot be considered an elder. Scripture never limits the elders’ ministry and leadership within the church. Therefore, different needs in different congregations will call for different roles from their elders.

As stated above, an elder serves as a fellow leader with the pastor in the church. A congregation calls the pastor to be its spiritual overseer. But the congregation also elects its elders to work with the pastor in leading the church. I believe that most WELS churches consist of members who would define an elder as someone who helps with member visits, visits delinquents, discusses church matters, and attends meetings. However, since the Bible does not prescribe roles for elders of the New Testament church, their leadership roles should be defined depending on the context and culture of the church. Because of this, a pastor and his congregation might choose to have their elders keep the traditional roles already discussed. However, America’s cultural and ethnic landscape is changing. The neighborhoods surrounding many WELS churches are becoming increasingly more colorful. This presents a new, and at some times more difficult, mission field for these churches and pastors. Reaching out cross-culturally requires the use of different tactics to establish leaders, or elders, in such a new setting.

In a traditional WELS church, the elders can often speak frankly to fellow members about the future direction of the church. In a traditionally mono-cultural WELS church, the members will also respond frankly to the elders in order to allow the elders to lead in a way that represents the congregation’s thoughts and ministry approach. However, consider the Caucasian pastor who is serving in a Hispanic church. This pastor wants to serve his Hispanic members in a way that helps them. In order to do this, he needs feedback from his Hispanic members and

elders. However, he gets the sense his congregation only tells him what they think he wants to hear – instead of their honest feedback. What can the pastor do to truly help his people? This is just one example of the challenges white pastors face in cross-cultural churches. Therefore, a new strategy needs to be implemented to establish elders in a cross-cultural setting.

Different cultures view leadership differently. A cross-cultural mission field may not respond well to sitting in meetings at appointed times or the “usual” WELS organizational structure. They may have different ideas concerning what church leaders do. If a pastor wants to find elders in such a cross-cultural community, he needs to be ready to rethink the traditional WELS elder roles and reconstruct them in order to fit the culture with which he is working.

So what is an elder? What does an elder do? What should a pastor seek to do with his elders from different cultures? Of course, a pastor will seek answers to these questions in Scripture. It is there he can gain insight about more flexible elder roles by reading what Scripture does and does not say about elders. A study of the word “elders” in the Bible will reveal answers about what it means to be an elder today. The Bible tells us how elders were appointed, why they were important, what their different roles were, and what God’s qualifications are for elders in his New Testament church.

I. Does Scripture say how elders are chosen?

The Old Testament does not reveal how men in the Bible became elders. This is quite telling. It helps explain who should be considered for elders in the church. So who *does* get to be an elder? How are elders appointed? These are some questions that need to be answered from the Bible. But the question to begin with is: Who was an “elder” in the Bible? This will reveal how such men came to be elders. It will also explain who should be considered for elders in the church today.

The word study begins by looking at the Hebrew. The Old Testament only uses two words for “elders”: the roots $\aleph \aleph$ & $\aleph \aleph$. $\aleph \aleph$ (“old”)¹³ is used all but five times. Those other five

¹³ F. Brown, S. R. Driver & C.A. Briggs, *Enhanced Brown-Driver-Briggs Hebrew and English Lexicon* (electronic ed.) (Oak Harbor, WA: Logos Research Systems, 2000), 278.

times all appear in Ezra¹⁴ where the root עָיַב (“to be hoary/old headed”)¹⁵ is used. When זְקֵנִים is used in the plural, it is translated as “elders,”¹⁶ as in a people who have authority,¹⁷ or leaders of a people/nation.¹⁸ This is the same concept with the root עָיַב.

When elders were appointed to leadership by biblical leaders like Moses, there was already a group of available elders from which he could choose. It appears that it was easy to recognize who the elders available to be chosen were. In Exodus 3:16, the LORD tells Moses – before Moses became Israel’s leader – “Go, assemble the elders of Israel.” Scripture does not say from where this system of elders came. It seems that they were chosen because they were mature and wise.¹⁹ The elders were also easy to recognize because they were the men who were worthy of respect among their people.²⁰

Elders were not specific only to the nation of Israel. Many other nations also had a representative leading group of elders. The Old Testament tells of groups of elders from Midian and Moab,²¹ Gibeon,²² and Egypt.²³ The nations of the Ancient Near East were tribal and clan-oriented, resulting in their system of elders acting as a leading and representative unit. “Each tribe consists of ‘clans’ (sub-tribal units); each ‘clan’ has a head, and the heads of the clans collectively are the elders; the head of the tribe comes from the ranks of these elders.”²⁴ The

¹⁴ 5:5; 5:9; 6:7; 6:8; 6:14

¹⁵ Brown, Driver & Briggs, 1114.

¹⁶ Exodus 3:16; Leviticus 9:1; Joshua 7:6; Job 12:20

¹⁷ Deuteronomy 25:7-9; Joshua 20:4; Proverbs 31:23

¹⁸ Numbers 11:16; Deuteronomy 5:23; Jeremiah 26:17

¹⁹ Kings consulted the advice of the elders (Rehoboam did in 1Ki 12:6). The elders were also entrusted to make decisions concerning the affairs of the citizens (Dt 21; Ezr 10:8).

²⁰ Leviticus 19:32; Job 12:20; Psalm 119:100; Isaiah 9:15; Lamentations 4:16, 5:12

²¹ Numbers 22:4,7

²² Joshua 9:11

²³ Psalm 105:22. Here, the context tells the story of Joseph in Egypt.

²⁴ Campbell, 25.

elders were able to speak on behalf of their fellow people. They represented the cares, concerns, fears, and hopes of their clans and tribes. The body of elders was recognized by the people below them as their representatives to other leaders (like Moses and Joshua).

In order to establish a relationship between the Israelites living in Egypt and Moses, the LORD commanded Moses to go before the Israelite elders and present himself as one sent by the LORD to lead the Israelites out of Egypt.²⁵ Since the elders led as representatives of the Israelite people, the LORD wanted Moses to inform the elders about the LORD's plan to lead them out of Egypt. This is why the LORD wanted Moses to speak with the elders of the Israelites.²⁶ Moses needed to establish with them – as the leaders of Israel – that he was going to be the LORD's appointed leader for Israel. Moses showed the elders that they would work together with him acting as God's authority to them. In Exodus 3:18, the LORD made it clear that Moses would not lead on his own, but with the elders. The LORD told Moses: "You *and the elders* (emphasis added) are to go to the king of Egypt and say to him, 'The LORD, the God of the Hebrews, has met with us. Let us take a three-day journey into the desert to offer sacrifices to the LORD our God.'" This matter of Old Testament elders working together with the LORD's leaders will be discussed further in a few pages.

In Exodus 18, Moses followed the advice of his father-in-law, Jethro, to utilize the elders to keep Moses from wearing himself out. This was not only for Moses' benefit, but also for the benefit of the people. In Exodus 18:23, Jethro said, "If you do this and God so commands, you will be able to stand the strain, and all these people will go home satisfied." The most important piece of advice Jethro gave to Moses was in verse 21: "Select capable men from all the people—men who fear God, trustworthy men who hate dishonest gain—and appoint them as officials." Jethro understood that in order to have trustworthy elders or leaders, those leaders must first trust God. The Israelites' body of elders provided a respected and trustworthy group of men for Moses, Israel's leader. From these men, he could choose godly men to lead alongside him, in order to share the responsibilities of leadership and help all the Israelites.

²⁵ Exodus 3:14-18

²⁶ Exodus 3,4

The elders in the New Testament also held positions of leadership. The Greek uses two words for elders: πρεσβύτερος and γερουσία.²⁷ Both words are used to translate both זְבִינִי and זְבִינִי in the Septuagint, with γερουσία appearing mainly in Deuteronomy, referring to the judicial role of the elders.²⁸ In the gospels as well as the early chapters of Acts, the elders are described as Israelite leaders with influence on the leadership of the synagogues. The elders are listed with the chief priests and rulers many times.²⁹ Often when the elders were listed among those other dignitaries, they were involved in important decisions.³⁰ These elders were a group of men who had a powerful influence on the decision of the other leaders in Jerusalem. The elders' advice and leadership was greatly respected both in the Old Testament and the New Testament.

In the early Christian churches, the term “elder” took on a different nuance. The elders in these churches were still recognized as leaders, but were no longer using leadership as a way to influence politics and decisions. They were not there to influence officials like the elders did with Pontius Pilate, or persuade officials to remove apostles like in Acts 4. The elders were there to lead and grow the Christian churches. These elders consisted of both Jews and gentiles.³¹ They formed part of the leadership in the head church at Jerusalem.³² They were important in establishing a church: “Paul and Barnabas appointed elders for them in each church and, with prayer and fasting, committed them to the Lord, in whom they had put their trust” (Ac 14:23). Paul knew that in order for the church to grow, it needed leaders to direct the affairs of the church. The elders were to be these leaders. Paul felt confident in equipping the elders to lead the new churches on their own. When he bid farewell to the elders in Ephesus, Paul told them: “Keep watch over yourselves and all the flock of which the Holy Spirit has made you overseers.

²⁷ γερουσία is only used once, in Acts 5:21. There, it refers to the make-up of the Jewish Sanhedrin.

²⁸ Deuteronomy 19:12; 21:2-4, 6, 19; 22:15-18; 25:7-9

²⁹ Matthew 21:23; 26:3; 27:3; Luke 9:22; Acts 4:5, 23

³⁰ Like crucifying Jesus (Mt 27:20; Mk 15:1) or trying to silence the apostles (Ac 4:1-7).

³¹ Paul appointed elders in gentile areas like Lystra, Iconium, Antioch (Ac 14), and Ephesus (Ac 20), as well as others. He also charged Titus to appoint elders in every town he visited (Tit 1:5), which included gentile towns.

³² Acts 11:30, 21:18

Be shepherds of the church of God” (Ac 20:28). This was Paul’s practice: to preach the gospel in a city and equip men there to be the elders who would continue to lead the church after he left.

So what does all this mean in regards to establishing elders as leaders in cross-cultural churches today? It is important to point out that the elders of ancient Israel were respected men already recognized as leaders in their respective clans or tribes. Men like the elders who worked with Moses knew how their people thought and functioned. They knew what problems to take to Moses and what problems to handle on their own. If a pastor finds himself in a cross-cultural community and does not know where to find elders to work with him, he should just pay attention to the people around him. Of course, he will not be able to ask, “Who are your elders?” Yet it should be clear from observing and engaging a community, a church, or a family who it is that represents the respective groups. These men are the ones who are looked to for leadership, discipline, and advice within their group.

The pastor should seek to evangelize such men from the culture of his community. These men can be valuable assets as elders and fellow leaders in the church. They will give the pastor the insight into their culture and families that he desires. They are respected by their culture, and can speak to the pastor and their people with integrity, concerning the culture. Their advice to the pastor holds a great deal of weight since they know how their culture thinks and responds to leadership. Their words of leadership to their culture supporting the pastor will less likely be quickly rejected without due consideration because of their respected position within the culture. Elders who represent their culture to the pastor will allow the pastor to work with them in order to build up the kingdom of God within the community.

II. What is the importance of elders?

In order to make conclusions on the importance of elders in Scripture and today, it is beneficial to point out insightful instances from Scripture. To begin with, the elders were present whenever an important leader was appointed over the Israelite people. As mentioned earlier, Moses went first to the elders in order to establish leadership alongside them. Moses made sure

the elders were present when he conferred leadership upon Joshua.³³ When David was anointed as king, the elders were there.³⁴ It is also important to note that when Saul was made king, the elders were not present; and throughout Saul's reign there was an apparent lack of working together with the elders of Israel.³⁵ In the time of the judges, the elders often were the ones to seek and establish a new judge. This is expressly evident from the account of Gilead in Judges 11.

The elders were also present whenever one of Israel's leaders established a covenant with the LORD. When Moses brought the promise of the LORD's covenant before Israel, he presented it to the elders.³⁶ Before Joshua died, he made sure that the Israelites renewed the covenant with the LORD.³⁷ Before he did this, he brought Israel's leaders – including the elders (who are listed first)³⁸ – to present themselves before God.³⁹ When King Josiah renewed the covenant from the Book of the Covenant, he made sure to call together “all the elders of Judah and Jerusalem” (2Ki 23:1-3; 2Chr 34:29-33). Ezra, after leading some of the exiles back from Babylon, led the people to repentance. In order to show their repentance before the LORD, the exiles sought to make a covenant before him and remove all foreign women from their midst. In order to accomplish this, they sought the work and leadership of the elders.⁴⁰

There are many times in the Old Testament when the LORD spoke directly to his leaders. Often when he did so, he wanted his leaders (specifically Moses and Joshua) to bring elders to

³³ Deuteronomy 31:28 says that Moses gathered the elders together before he spoke, and 32:44 states that he brought Joshua with him for these statements. 34:9 tells that the leaders of Israel recognized Joshua was the successor to Moses' leadership because of what Moses had done and told them.

³⁴ 2 Samuel 5:3

³⁵ Connect this to Saul's rejection of the LORD during his reign and the inevitable failure of his reign. See 1 Samuel 15:22-29 for the LORD's rejection of Saul as king.

³⁶ Exodus 19:1-8

³⁷ Joshua 24:1-27

³⁸ “He summoned the elders, leaders, judges and officials of Israel...” (Jos 24:1).

³⁹ Joshua 24:1

⁴⁰ Ezra 10:1-17

hear him as well. The elders came to hear the LORD speak from fire when he gave the law.⁴¹ When the LORD spoke to Joshua about Achan's sin, the elders were there with him.⁴² Repeatedly when the LORD wanted to speak to Moses, he commanded Moses to bring only a select group of elders with him to hear the LORD speak. This happened when the LORD allowed Moses to draw water from a rock.⁴³ Seventy elders were allowed to see God, along with Moses, Aaron, Nadab, and Abihu, when the LORD chose to confirm his covenant to Moses.⁴⁴ When the Israelites complained about not having food, the LORD called Moses to bring seventy elders along to hear the LORD speak.⁴⁵ The LORD did this in order to give the elders his Spirit, so they could help Moses lead.⁴⁶ It is clear that the LORD wanted his elders to be part of the leading process by hearing what he decreed.

It is also interesting to note the times when there was no open communication between the elders and some of the Israelite kings. During the reign of certain wicked kings, the Israelites were led away from the LORD and his will and covenant. King Rehoboam rejected the advice of the elders who represented the people of Israel.⁴⁷ Instead, he chose to listen to the young, inexperienced men with whom he grew up and was familiar. This choice proved to be troublesome, because it led to the rebellion of the northern ten tribes, who formed a new kingdom.⁴⁸ Also consider the reign of wicked King Ahab over the ten northern tribes. In 1 Kings 21, he conspired with his queen, Jezebel, to steal Naboth's vineyard. The elders chose to be involved in Ahab's wicked plot, rather than leading him in the way of the LORD.⁴⁹ This great

⁴¹ Deuteronomy 5:23,24

⁴² Joshua 7:1-18

⁴³ Exodus 17:1-6

⁴⁴ Exodus 24:9-11

⁴⁵ Numbers 11:4-25

⁴⁶ Numbers 11:16-17

⁴⁷ 1 Kings 12:8, 13-15; 2 Chronicles 10:8, 13-15

⁴⁸ 1 Kings 12:16-21; 2 Chronicles 10: 16-19

⁴⁹ 1 Kings 21:8-12

sin provoked the LORD to curse Ahab and Israel.⁵⁰ Contrary to Ahab's elders, note the elders during the reign of Joram over Israel. When Joram wanted the prophet Elisha dead for speaking for the LORD, the elders chose to sit with Elisha⁵¹ – a man of God – rather than Joram, who led Israel away from the LORD. When the elders and kings were not communicating together for the will of the LORD, the kingdom suffered.

The importance of the elders and their work in the early Christian church is seen in Acts 15,16. In these chapters, every time the word “elders” is used it is connected with “apostles” (οἱ ἄποστολοι καὶ οἱ πρεσβύτεροι).⁵² These instances refer to the decision concerning the circumcision of gentiles for conversion into the Christian church reached by the Council at Jerusalem. It is clear from this context that the elders were held in high regard for their leadership within the Christian church at large. The apostles were set apart as leaders of the Christian church by Christ himself. But they worked hand-in-hand with the elders to strengthen the church, specifically seen in regard to the important decision concerning gentile circumcision reached during the Council at Jerusalem in Acts 15.

The elders' leadership in the Bible was important. What implications do the above paragraphs hold for a pastor's ministry? If a pastor wishes to reach out to another cultural community, he will want to establish himself as the spiritual leader to the “elders” of that culture. The pastor has been theologically trained to lead God's people. But he also needs the leadership help of elders within the culture of his community. Moses went before the elders of Israel to show them that he was chosen by God to be their spiritual leader. He also wanted to make it clear that together they would lead the Jewish people. In order for a pastor to make the same claims to a cultural group, it would be helpful for him to seek out the leaders of that group first. Then they can together lead the community and congregation in an informed manner which will bring many spiritual blessings. The LORD chose to speak with Moses and Joshua together with the elders who led alongside them. It is clear, then, that God wants a pastor to work alongside and together with the elders and not minister to a community on his own.

⁵⁰ 1 Kings 21:17-26

⁵¹ 2 Kings 6:32

⁵² Acts 15:2, 4, 6, 22, 23; 16:4

It is also important for a pastor to meet with his elders at God's Word, in order to grow in the will of God, their ultimate leader. The decision reached by the Council at Jerusalem provides insight into how a pastor should work with his elders. Although the apostles had authority given to them by Christ, they did not hold it over the elders. They sought the elders' input in regard to the decision about gentile circumcision. In order to reach this decision, the apostles and elders discussed the matter with each other⁵³ (Ac 15:6,7) and looked to the Word of God for answers.⁵⁴ A pastor should not act or think as though he is above the elders. He is their spiritually trained leader. But the pastor is also to communicate and work with them on the same level regarding matters of the church. This communication should be done around open discussion and study in the Bible.

The elders are important to the work of the church because they provide leadership along with the pastor. The pastor is trained in God's Word and so helps train the elders in the Word as well. The elders help lead and train the pastor in matters concerning their culture, so the pastor is informed on how to apply God's Word to the culture. Together, the elders and the pastor can lead a congregation because they are informed and trained in both God's Word and the culture they serve.

III. What were the elders' roles?

This question finds many answers in the Bible. Of course, that might seem to leave pastors today with many answers concerning the roles of their elders. But it could be stated in one answer: The role of an elder should be open and flexible. The elders held several roles in both the Old and New Testaments. As a result of the patriarchal and tribal nature of the Old Testament Israelites,⁵⁵ the elders served as representatives of their people.⁵⁶ The elders

⁵³ Acts 15:6,7

⁵⁴ James quotes Amos 9:11,12 in Acts 15:16,17 concerning God's will to save the gentiles as well as the Jews. He mentions in Acts 15:18 that this is something which has been spoken of for ages in other places of Scripture.

⁵⁵ Campbell, 21.

⁵⁶ Elders represented their nation, their tribe, their clan or simply their own family.

represented groups of people with whom they were associated. They served in this representative role during sacrifices⁵⁷ as well as decrees⁵⁸.

In Ezra 5,6 the elders served as a ruling council in order to restore the exiled Israelites back in Jerusalem. As that council, the elders led the Israelites when they rebuilt the temple. The elders in Ezra also did not hesitate to speak about God to others.⁵⁹ Throughout Deuteronomy⁶⁰ and in Ezra 10, the elders are described as filling a judicial role, in order to provide judgment on various laws. They carried out the LORD's wishes by decreeing punishment to the Israelite people for breaking the LORD's laws. In Ruth 4, the elders also were present as witnesses for Boaz when he was to marry Ruth. Old Testament elders were known as leaders to the Israelites.⁶¹ In many instances, the elders were listed alongside other leaders and officials.⁶² Elders served as guards at the gates of the city.⁶³ Elders served as an advisory council to kings, and their guidance was respected among the people.⁶⁴ The statements above show that Old Testament elders served many roles which called upon them for representation, leadership, governance, and wise advice. Through these roles, they helped lead God's people in the way he wanted them to go.

⁵⁷ Leviticus 4:15; 9:1

⁵⁸ Exodus 19:7; Joshua 8:33,34; 23:1-16

⁵⁹ Ezra 5:9-12

⁶⁰ 19:12; 21:2, 3, 6, 19, 20; 22:15-18; 25:7-9; 31:9

⁶¹ Numbers 11:16

⁶² Deuteronomy 5:23 (“...all the leading men of your tribes and your elders came to me.”), 21:2 (“Your elders and judges shall go out...”); Joshua 8:33 (“...their elders, officials and judges were standing...”), 23:2 (“...elders, leaders, judges and officials...”), 24:1 (“...He summoned the elders, leaders, judges and officials of Israel...”); 1 Kings 8:1 (“...summoned into his presence at Jerusalem the elders of Israel, all the heads of the tribes and the chiefs of the Israelite families...”); 2 Kings 10:5 (“...the palace administrator, the city governor, the elders and the guardians sent this message...”); 2 Chronicles 5:2 (“...Solomon summoned to Jerusalem the elders of Israel, all the heads of the tribes and the chiefs of the Israelite families...”); Isaiah 9:15 (“...The elders and prominent men are the head...”)

⁶³ Joshua 20:4; Ruth 4:11; Proverbs 31:23; Lamentations 5:14

⁶⁴ 1 Kings 12:6; 20:7,8; Job 12:20; Ezekiel 7:26

In the New Testament, the elders filled many roles in a different setting: the Christian church. Elders in the New Testament church served as leaders. They clearly held a prominent leading role in the church, as demonstrated in the Scripture references below. The gift for the famine in Judea collected by Paul and Barnabas in Antioch was sent to the elders in Judea.⁶⁵ The elders in Jerusalem led with the apostles in order to reach a decision during the Council at Jerusalem.⁶⁶ When Paul wanted to bid farewell and give encouragement to the church at Ephesus, he called for the elders.⁶⁷ Paul wrote that there were elders who directed the affairs of the church.⁶⁸ The elders also knew the people they led well. In Jerusalem, they advised Paul that it would be beneficial for his ministry among them if he joined in a purification rite with some men who had taken a vow, so as not to cause offense.⁶⁹

As the elders led the New Testament church, they filled other roles as well. They were the overseers and shepherds of the church. In Paul's encouragement to the Ephesian elders in Acts 20, he told them: "Keep watch over yourselves and all the flock of which the Holy Spirit has made you overseers. Be shepherds of the church of God, which he bought with his own blood" (v. 28). New Testament elders had roles which involved teaching and even preaching in the church.⁷⁰ In this way, the elders were also equippers – they had the role of bringing up others for leadership in the Word of God. Some elders were involved in ordination (or at least the outward symbol of passing on leadership); at some point certain elders had laid hands upon Timothy.⁷¹ There is even a record of the elders making 1st century hospital visits in the Bible. They reminded the sick of God's care and healing power over them through prayer.⁷²

⁶⁵ Acts 11:30

⁶⁶ Acts 15

⁶⁷ Acts 20:17

⁶⁸ 1 Timothy 5:17

⁶⁹ Acts 21:17-25

⁷⁰ 1 Timothy 5:17

⁷¹ 1 Timothy 4:14

⁷² James 5:14. Concerning this verse, David Kuske explains that the emphasis is on the elders praying for the sick, not the anointing with oil. He supports this by saying that the oil was used *after* the prayer, as symbolism of God's blessing and healing power. (David P. Kuske, *Exegetical Brief: James 5:14—“Anoint Him With Oil.”*)

The elders' leadership covered a broad range of roles. In the New Testament, the office of an elder is used synonymously with the office of an overseer (ἐπισκοπή) – a term that might describe how our modern day pastors function. In Acts 20:28, Paul urged the Ephesian elders to lead the church like overseers. Paul wrote to Titus about appointing elders who had the heart and qualifications of an overseer.⁷³ Peter gave encouragement to the Christians throughout Asia Minor to have the elders “be shepherds of God’s flock...serving as overseers” (1 Pe 5:1,2). Watching over the flock of God’s people in a church was not just the job of one man – a lone shepherd or overseer.⁷⁴ In fact, it has been suggested that the terms πρεσβύτερος and ἐπισκοπή are used interchangeably in some of the Epistles.⁷⁵ New Testament elders clearly had similar and equal roles to what we would consider the roles of a pastor today. Their situational roles have major implications on how we should utilize elders from different cultures today.

Since the terms elder and overseer can be used to refer to the same office, it suggests no prescription for an exact role of church leadership for elders in the church. So how can pastors apply this to cross-cultural leadership in the church? A helpful application is found in Acts 6. There, two different cultures – Hebraic Jews and Grecian Jews – were working together in one church. The Grecian Jews needed help for their widows and turned to the apostles for that help. The apostles acknowledged their need and saw no problem in assigning certain Grecian Jews a position of leadership to oversee that need. Today, many pastors have seen a need in helping the shut-ins and those who are hospitalized. Pastors then look to identify good elders who are called or appointed by the church so they can help pastors in this work. Pastors see no problem doing

⁷³ Titus 1:5-7

⁷⁴ Not like the “Herr Pastor” model of leadership.

⁷⁵ “As to the two titles, presbyters and bishops, however, there can be no doubt that they *are* used interchangeably, the duties of the presbyters even being described by the term ἐπισκοπέειν (1 Pe 5:1). This use of ἐπισκοπέειν to describe the duties of the presbyters explains why the incumbents of this ministry carried two different titles, the one, πρεσβύτερος, springing out of the analogy of the Jewish synagogue and used to express the dignity of the office, the other, ἐπισκοπή, springing out of the analogy of Greek institutions and used to designate the functions of this office. It is, therefore, not surprising that these two terms could be used interchangeably and that they were used indiscriminately. “It is by human authority,” to quote our Confession, “that the grades of bishop and elder or pastor are distinct” but it is “by divine authority” that “the grades of bishop and pastor are not diverse” (Smalcaldic Articles, Trigl. 523, 63 and 65).” (P. Peters. *Are the Terms Elders, Bishops, Deacons, Evangelists and Others Used Interchangeably in the New Testament?*)

this. Since Scripture does not prescribe specific roles for elders, pastors do not need to hesitate to acknowledge needs within their cross-cultural setting and have the church call elders from different cultures to fill “new” or “different” roles. Often, these new roles cannot be realized by the pastor who is outside of the culture. That is where the help of cross-cultural elders comes into play.

Pastors going into a cross-cultural setting will not be able to understand all the problems and needs of that culture. They can however, turn to the elders of that culture, because the elders understand the needs of their own culture. The pastor can get help in utilizing his elders by finding new roles for them. He can do this by listening to their advice about filling the culture’s needs. Consider the representative roles of the Old Testament elders. Pastors can make the most of the elders’ representation of their culture today by working with the elders to discover how they can serve the real needs of their culture in the church with new roles. Just as the roles of the elders in the New Testament differed depending on the situation of their congregations, so pastors can equip their elders for different and varied roles. The many roles of biblical elders may leave churches without specific prescriptions for elders today. But the way their roles are used in Scripture allows them to work out many ministry possibilities for cross-cultural elders today.

IV. What are the qualifications for an elder?

Because the roles of elders are wide and varied, does that mean we just grab someone and place him as an elder wherever and whenever? Of course, it does not. We know God commands order in his church.⁷⁶ But beyond that, our Lord also gives qualifications for his leaders. Titus 1:5,6 explains that an elder should be a man whose family life expresses Christian values – married to one woman⁷⁷ and able to control his family.

Since the term elder is used closely to and connected with the term overseer, it is helpful to see what the Lord says about the qualifications of both elders and overseers. There are qualifications for the elders “serving as overseers” in 1 Peter 5:1-3. There it is clear that elders

⁷⁶ 1 Corinthians 14:40

⁷⁷ However, an elder can also be unmarried. Paul called himself an elder (1 Pe 5:1), yet he also wrote that he was unmarried and celibate (1 Co 7:8).

should not be men who seek the position for their own favor or wealth, but men who seek to serve for Christ's glory and do not use their position to hold it over the church. Titus 1:7-9 speaks about the qualifications of overseers. The apostle Paul wrote that such men ought to "hold firmly to the trustworthy message" which will lead them to be self-controlled and not violent. 1 Timothy 3:1-7 speaks more about the qualifications for an overseer. There, Paul expanded on the matter of self-control and speaks to the overseer's family life as well. He added that the overseer should have "a good reputation with outsiders." Elders serve as leaders, overseers, and shepherds of God's flock in their congregations. For that reason, the Lord commands that there are certain qualifications for them to serve. Unlike the elders' roles, these qualifications are prescriptions from God's Word.

In conclusion, God desires a godly person to be an elder in his church. God wants pastors to look for elders that are not only respectable in the eyes of the people, but also in his eyes. Therefore, a pastor will not just choose an elder from another culture simply because the man can represent his culture's wants, needs, and concerns to the pastor. A pastor will want to look for such an elder who also fits the criteria from the Bible listed above. This is certainly not the last or least concern of choosing elders from another culture. It may be hard to find men who fit all of the implications listed in the first three sections, yet also fit God's qualification for elders. But that is one of the challenges of ministry. Pastors are to not only find elders with godly leadership qualities. They also will then instruct and train their elders in Scripture to develop God's leadership qualifications within them.

3. HELPFUL INSIGHTS FROM CROSS-CULTURAL LEADERS

The educational system for pastors in the Wisconsin Evangelical Lutheran Synod is grounded on Scripture and an emphasis on the gospel in the Means of Grace. Because of all the training a traditional WELS pastor receives, it might be easy for him to go into a congregation thinking he has studied enough and knows how to handle himself and the congregation. I pray this is not the case, for no pastor is ever fully ready to serve everyone, no matter the level of his education.

One piece that may be lacking from a traditional WELS pastor's education is in the area of cultural diversity. WELS pastors can go out into the ministry field without much – if any – ministry experience among a culture other than their own (a mainly white, middle class culture). So what do pastors today do when they go out into a culturally diverse America? I have confidence WELS pastors have a heart for the souls in their church's community and desire to reach them with the gospel. Pastors without much cross-cultural experience may go into such areas of ministry with full intention to equip leaders from another culture and share the ministry with them. Unfortunately, it's not always that simple. Speaking to me about the possibility of being in a cross-cultural ministry, a lay leader in a central-city church told me, "You know that would increase your work-load about ten times, right?"

All pastors know that raising up leaders takes much time, no matter if they are working with their own culture or another. Yet sometimes it might seem easier for a pastor to do all the work himself. At best that leads to pastoral burnout; at worst it leads to turning souls off to the gospel. A pastor who tries to do all the cross-cultural work on his own will revert to his own culture's way of leading – which may not work among the new culture he serves. This can confuse and offend other cultures and turn them away from his message of the gospel. For the pastor's cultural leadership may seem good and right to him, but concerning leadership with another culture: he does not know what he does not know. Therefore, he may not be able to lead another culture well.

Pastors cannot expect to reach out to a culturally diverse community and do cross-cultural ministry without first understanding that culture. Pastors cannot expect other cultures to have a sense of ownership within a church which lacks leaders who are a part of their culture, or

even understand their culture. If simply being in a cross-cultural setting is going to make a pastor's ministry more time-consuming (though no less enjoyable), how can the pastor go about working with leaders from a different culture? He is certainly going to need help. Leaders from other cultures can provide that help. But the pastor must remember to learn from these leaders just as much as he teaches them about leading in the church.

In order to learn about pastors leading with leaders from another culture in the church I spoke to leaders from Hmong, Hispanic, and African American cultures to hear what they have to say about working with white pastors in their respective cultures. They spoke about the joys and hardships of leading together, about how they view leadership, and about what a white pastor seeking to lead with their cultures should know. In the pages below are common themes of what these leaders had to say.⁷⁸ The intention in these pages was not to break down each culture and how to work with their leaders. Instead, it was to give insight from those who have worked first-hand with white WELS pastors so future pastors can see how far a loving heart and open mind – which does not compromise the gospel – can go in leading with other cultures. Below are common themes relating to establishing relationships with cross-cultural leaders in the church.

I. Finding Leaders

What if a pastor finds himself in a situation where he needs to find leaders from a different culture? How might he identify who will be a good leader? Many of the leaders I spoke to said it would be difficult to get the men to step forward and take leadership at first. “Many times it is easy for the guys to lay back and let the pastor make the decisions.” “(The men) are not prone to volunteer. They need to be pushed into action.” So how can a pastor get the cross-cultural leaders to work with him? One way is to pay attention in the Bible classes. There he will see the men who are growing in God's Word and take the mission of the church to heart. From there, the pastor can go to these men and train them for leadership in the Bible.

When a pastor has identified some men whom he feels would make good leaders, he should approach them. Cross-cultural members may not always feel comfortable approaching a

⁷⁸ Any portions below marked off by quotation marks are quotes from Hmong, Hispanic, or African American leaders gained during interviews concerning cross-cultural leadership in the church.

white pastor about volunteering. Often times they will stay in the background. But this does not mean that possible leaders are opposed to leading. “We’ll do it. But we won’t volunteer on our own for the most part.” The leaders I spoke to stressed the importance of approaching the men of their culture about leading. This face-to-face contact makes it evident that the pastor truly does see importance in their insight, help, and leadership in the congregation. “You will probably find yourself in a situation where you need to encourage people to participate more instead of the other way around where you will have to slow them down.”

A pastor can also find leaders outside of a Bible class setting. Let’s face it, not all leaders will attend the Bible classes. A pastor who makes it a point to communicate with his members at every opportunity will find leadership qualities. The pastor can speak to the cross-cultural members before and after church and on visits so he gets to know them. He will soon recognize the passions and gifts of his members. When a pastor recognizes these gifts, he must make sure to ask prospective leaders to volunteer. He can also invite them to biblical training for leadership within the church. When cross-cultural leaders have been established, these leaders can recruit and ask other leaders to join. It can be very powerful for one person to hear from another leader of his own culture that he would make a good leader.

II. Spend Time

One of the most essential things for a pastor to remember when establishing elders is to spend time with them. “Getting the leaders together from time to time is important...to let the leaders know that you appreciate them.” When a pastor spends more time with his elders from other cultures, he is able to recognize several things, such as: how they solve problems, what they value, how their families are structured, and how they view leadership. Spending time with the elder shows them that their pastor cares for them and wants to be a part of their life even outside of the church setting. “Basically, show your love.”

Spending time and showing love to elders from other cultures will involve flexibility. Time is viewed differently across all cultures. At times the pastor has to be able to set aside what he thinks is the best use of his time in order to be flexible according to the schedule of his cross-cultural elders. “This may mean that you have meetings over breakfast or coffee with the leaders at a home, instead of your typical once-a-month elder meeting.” When a pastor makes it his

priority to spend time with his elders, it shows that he truly keeps the concern of his elders in mind. As the elders notice the pastor cares about spending time with them, they may open up more about their concerns. When they voice their concerns to the pastor, they can work together to serve the kingdom of God in a more beneficial way.

III. Communication

Communication *must* happen in order to develop leadership in any setting and any culture. But the devil is always fighting against the mission of the church. Different cultures present challenges to each other. With these factors in mind, communication becomes even more important between the pastor and his cross-cultural elders. Communication plays a huge role in decision-making among the cross-cultural elders and the pastor. Some cultures do not want to lose face in front of a white pastor. Therefore, the leaders may not say what is truly on their mind. Other cultures do not want to “hurt the pastor’s feelings and may say ‘yes’ when they mean ‘no’ and ‘no’ when they mean ‘yes.’” This line of thinking presents challenges and confusion in the ministry of the church. If the pastor and the elders are not communicating to each other how they truly feel, then the church will not serve its people in the best way.

So how can a pastor work with this challenge? “A lot of talking – this avoids a possible complication.” Communication will happen when the pastor makes it a point to spend time with his cross-cultural elders. Communication helps both cultures understand each other’s real concerns. In order to overcome the “yes-means-no” and “no-means-yes” difficulty, a pastor should make it a point not to use yes-and-no questions. Instead, it is best to converse in an open dialogue. This allows the pastor to hear what the cross-cultural elders view as pro’s and con’s. By engaging in open conversation, the pastor can understand how the elders truly feel about a situation. “Real conversation is the best route. Do not seek only yes or no answers. Both parties need to unpack what is in their hearts to find the best solution.”

Cross-cultural communication will surely have its misunderstandings. It is inevitable that misinterpretation will occur between the pastor and his cross-cultural elders. When this does happen, both cultures should “be patient in explaining (their) reasoning.” There may be times when the pastor does not understand what the elders are telling him. A good way for him to understand is by being patient and not asking for the elders to repeat. Instead, “Say something

like, ‘Is *this* what you mean?’ This can help the two get on the same page.” When a pastor lets the elders know what he is hearing them say, he can ask them to confirm or deny if that is really what they mean. With this kind of communication the pastor establishes trust and open dialogues in the future.

There may be times the other culture does not feel like they can approach the pastor with criticism concerning the way he responds to them and their culture. However, such criticism will help the pastor communicate better with the cross-cultural elders. Constructive criticism allows the pastor and elders to work together more closely. The pastor should seek out such criticism for his benefit: “Going into any congregation – especially a culturally diverse congregation – you can’t go in thinking you have all the answers. I think *that* will cause more conflict.” And yet, some cultures may not be willing to give this desired criticism. To receive analysis of his leadership, a pastor should verbalize to his elders that he truly seeks, needs, and *wants* the criticism. This can accomplish two things: it gets the input the pastor is looking for, and it also shows the elders that he does not place himself above them. One leader suggested the following sentences as a way a pastor can verbalize his need for criticism: “I am a sinner just like you. I need to improve because I am not perfect. In order to improve and serve you better, I want to hear your concerns about me.”

IV. Understanding

In order to recognize what the cross-cultural elders are saying, a pastor needs to know from where his elders are coming. The elders in the church will likely be recognized leaders within their community and families. They listen to their community and culture and represent their fears, cares, wants, and needs. They will bring these concerns and cares to the pastor and the church. A pastor cannot sweep these concerns under the rug simply because he does not feel the same way in his culture. One Hmong leader spoke about his relationship with understanding white pastors: “They let me do what I think is best for the Hmong people and try not to dictate that this is the only right way, which is great because not all ways work for the Hmong even though they work with the Anglo people.”

When pastors spend time with their elders and communicate with them about issues in and out of the church, they gain an understanding about how the elders’ culture thinks about

leadership and organization. Different cultures view organization and leadership in different ways. For the most part, WELS churches follow a similar organizational structure. As a result, a WELS pastor may find it hard to work with a different leadership structure than one he is accustomed to using. Understanding the other culture will help him adjust. When a pastor understands why his elders and congregation desire a “different” organizational structure, he can adjust accordingly to suit their needs. This understanding will flow out of the open communication a pastor has established with his elders from other cultures.

V. Representation

Spending time and communicating with the cross-cultural elders helps the pastor understand the leaders he is working with and also establishes trust. When there is trust between the pastor and the cross-cultural elders, the elders can show their community they are represented and cared for in the congregation. When the culture knows they are represented, they can feel that the church and the pastor are truly working for them. There are various ways to make this representation evident among the leaders.

The leaders I spoke to encouraged that one of the best ways to show the culture it is represented in the church is for the pastor to take cross-cultural elders with him on visits (shut-ins, evangelism, hospital, delinquents). “This speaks volumes to the people.” But the pastor must make sure that when he goes on visits, there is equal representation from both the pastor and the elder. “On the one hand, if (the elder) does all the talking, that doesn’t look good because it shows no authority for the pastor. But if the pastor does all the talking, then they will wonder if their culture is really being represented.”

The trust that exists between the pastor and cross-cultural elders allows the pastor to speak frankly among his elders without causing offense. It also allows the elders to speak frankly to the pastor without causing offense. The cross-cultural elders also feel comfortable speaking to their community on behalf of the pastor, because they know he stands behind them. They know they are able to represent the pastor and the church because of the trust he has in them. When the cross-cultural members of the congregation understand that their elders are truly representing them and their concerns, they will listen when the elders speak to them about issues from the pastor’s point of view as well. The trust between the pastor and elders will breed

representation among the congregation. That representation, in turn, will breed trust from the members and community toward the pastor and elders.

The cross-cultural elders' representation of their community and culture also allows them to speak to members about certain issues in a better way than the pastor is able. The leaders can go to their fellow men and women and speak to them frankly without causing offense. This is because they may know them differently and have possibly been around longer than the pastor. Because of this, the elders can communicate to their fellow members in a more intimate and urgent manner to express concerns about pressing issues.

VI. Be Visible

A pastor wants his fellow leaders in the cross-cultural community to work with him. But the pastor is also called as God's spokesman to the congregation and is seen by the members as their main leader. Because of this, it is important for the pastor to make himself visible not only at the church, but in other settings as well. "Let the leaders see you in a setting that is different from the church to let them see that you're a real person just like them. *That's* helpful." When the elders observe that the pastor understands their life outside of the church, they will be more appreciative of his input concerning congregational issues.

The pastor should also be visible to those cross-cultural members who are not his elders. This shows the members that they can take the elders' words to heart when they tell them that the pastor cares about them. It is also wise for the pastor to make himself visible to members of the community who may not be part of his church. This is beneficial for the same reason stated above. A pastor who makes himself visible shows that he is not trying to hide anything from his members or community. "Transparency is helpful so that everybody knows what's going on."

But it is not just enough to be seen. "Being visible" involves more than that. Some leaders I spoke to voiced concerns about pastors who seemed to only care for the cross-cultural elders and not the community. "Take more care to greet others. That is one thing I find in WELS that is horrible. Sometimes I can be with a group of my culture, and a pastor comes to me and talks to me and ignores the rest of the group. And he goes away and everyone says, 'What happened to that guy?' At least acknowledge the other people and say hello to them, to show that you care."

VII. Growing Together

“Work with the leadership. Encourage the leadership. But also *push* the leadership.” It is important for a pastor in any setting to follow this encouragement. But in a cross-cultural church, these practices help both the pastor and the elders see they are not dealing with differences between culture, race or ethnicity. Rather they are dealing with a unity in Christ and a unity in mission for Christ’s kingdom. They can grow together in that unity. Of course, the best way to grow is in the Word of God. Every leader I spoke to encouraged that the pastor should consistently use Bible studies with his elders. By training and equipping elders in God’s Word, the pastor and elders grow together in fellowship in Christ and a desire to work together for his kingdom. “Communication (between the elders and pastor) is also important in a devotional way.” Devotions and Bible studies can accompany not only meetings about church business, but also simple get-togethers between the pastor and elders. One leader also encouraged, “Another way to grow together is to make a point to pray together for everything.” Praying openly in front of each other involves trust and confidence in one another.

Taking cross-cultural elders on visits not only establishes representation within the cultural community, but it also helps the pastor and elders grow together. The pastor gets out into the community and learns about its values and concerns. He also sees how the cross-cultural elders communicate with their own culture and learns how he can communicate with that culture himself. The elders learn from the pastor about applying law and gospel. They see the scriptural principles they studied together put into use in practical ministry.

A pastor should not be the only one to set goals in the church, especially when working with cross-cultural elders. He will never be able to know what the problems and concerns of other cultures truly are. Therefore the pastor should have “a willingness to sit down with leadership and talk about what your goals are – asking for their suggestions and help.” “Let the leaders let you know what the problems are that they see.” Speaking about these issues together allows the elders and pastors to grow together in trust. The elders know their pastor cares about working for the church in a way that represents the concerns of their culture. The pastor grows by hearing firsthand what the real worries of his cross-cultural elders are and how he can address them.

VIII. Conclusions

The best way to sum up what the cross-cultural leaders discussed is: Develop relationships with your elders. In order to develop relationships with cross-cultural elders it is even more important to show care and love to them than in a mono-cultural setting. A pastor who shows that he cares and loves his community and leaders also displays an open heart which is willing to listen to what his cross-cultural elders tell him. “Give the benefit of the doubt. Because of WELS training, pastors can always be on the defensive against theological implications. Don’t be so defensive all the time. But be ready to listen to the motives behind their decisions.” One leader suggested that there are white pastors who do not always appear to listen to their cross-cultural elders when reaching a decision about the church. He said, “To be honest, I sometimes agree with the pastors’ decisions, but at times, I would like to see the whites listen to my culture and the reasoning behind their decisions.” Having a mindset that is willing to listen to ideas can go a long way in developing relationships with cross-cultural elders.

When considering the advice given by cross-cultural leaders, a pastor should also remember personalities will also differ. “People’s personalities are stronger than cultural issues.” As much as a pastor has to be sensitive to cultural issues and be patient, he will have to be more patient and sensitive to work with each elder according to his personality traits. How can a pastor work on all this? “Study the Word with your co-workers and show your love and appreciation and be *honest* with your people. Communication is key.” Of course, with the sinful nature, this is easier said than done. The *best* advice is taken from Scripture, “May the God who gives endurance and encouragement give you a spirit of unity among yourselves as you follow Christ Jesus, so that with one heart and mouth you may glorify the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ. Accept one another, then, just as Christ accepted you, in order to bring praise to God” (Romans 15:5-7).

4. HELPFUL INSIGHTS FROM PASTORS IN CROSS-CULTURAL COMMUNITIES

After hearing what cross-cultural leaders have to say about a white pastor working with leaders from a different culture, it will also help to hear what the white WELS pastors say. I have spoken to pastors who serve in Hispanic and African American settings. From them, I sought insights into what they have found works well in their cross-cultural settings. These pastors are able to speak from experience. They know what it is like to go into a situation feeling ill-prepared. They know what it is like to grow together with the people they serve, as they learn to understand each other. They know what it is like to look back on their ministry and see what they could have done better. They know what it is like to plan a ministry with another culture.

Therefore, from my meetings with these pastors, I have collected some thoughts, insights and advice directly from pastors who work in a cross-cultural ministry. Of course, the pastors spoke to the need of working with elders from the culture which they served. They spoke of many joys and many concerns. Below are some common themes identified from the meetings.⁷⁹ These pastors touched on many of the same issues and topics the cross-cultural leaders had also mentioned.

I. Finding Leaders

“White, suburban ministry uses more of a program-oriented, ‘come’ approach. But cross-cultural ministry is more of a ‘go’ approach.” Often, WELS churches in a suburban setting set up their ministry in a way that uses programs to bring the neighborhood to the church. The pastors talked about how – for the most part – in a cross-cultural setting with a white pastor, the neighborhood will not often come to that pastor on their own. For that reason, the pastors encouraged more of a “go approach.” When a pastor makes it his emphasis to go out into the community and let the community know he is there to be *their* pastor, it shows he cares. This sort of approach can help gain the trust of the community by showing the community what the church is about and who the pastor is.

⁷⁹ Any portions below marked off by quotation marks are quotes from pastors, gained during interviews concerning establishing cross-cultural elders in the church.

So it follows that if a pastor has to “go” in a cross-cultural setting in order to encourage people to come to his church, he will then have to “go” out and find cross-cultural elders for the church as well. The pastors I spoke to encouraged trying to get the men involved with small projects at first when beginning to identify elders. “Sign-up sheets just don’t seem to work in most cross-cultural settings. It’s not that they don’t want to help, it’s just not the way they get involved.” Therefore, in order to involve the cross-cultural members in smaller projects, a pastor should go and ask them directly. When a pastor asks the cross-cultural members to help in a face-to-face manner, it shows that the pastor wants to specifically engage the cross-cultural members. It shows that the pastor truly wants their help. “Sometimes, in a cross-cultural setting, when you make an announcement at the end of the service – looking for help – the cross-cultural members think that you’re just saying it to everyone because you ‘have to.’ But when you speak to them face-to-face, they realize that you care for their input and leadership.” “Make the case: ‘I really need you. I really want you to be here.’”

As in any setting, “Godliness is key in seeking to get leaders from cross-cultural settings.” Scripture touches on the God-given qualifications for leadership.⁸⁰ These qualifications are the same across all cultures. It might be difficult however, to identify the qualifications in cross-cultural settings where a pastor is trying to find elders to work with him. He might be tempted to cut the corners at times. “You will get burned after investing time with some leaders. But remember to help elders grow in God’s Word.”

II. Be open to doing things differently

Cross-cultural ministry is different from the traditional WELS white suburban ministry. Pastors, then, should be open to working with the elders differently as well. One pastor encouraged that those in cross-cultural settings should seek to make use of the “honeymoon time” – the time when a pastor is new to the church. “Go ahead and use the ‘excuse’ that you are new. You can feel free to make mistakes and chalk them up to being ‘the new guy.’” When in a cross-cultural setting, the pastor should “be on guard against reverting to safe methods.” The pastor should be ready and willing to make mistakes, in order to find out what works with the elders and what does not. “If you are in a situation that is not established, consider trying new

⁸⁰ 1 Timothy 3:1-13; Titus 1:5-9; 1 Peter 5:1-3

things.” Of course, these “new things” must coincide with biblical practice. But in failure, a pastor will also learn a great deal about leadership within his new culture.

For example, in a cross-cultural setting, the culture may be used to “different” types of meetings and “different” times for meetings (compared to what a WELS pastor might be used to). In such a situation, a pastor will want to be open to different leadership organizations within the church. “Be flexible in when you’re meeting and where you’re meeting.” If a pastor wants the cross-cultural elders to be involved, he must be ready to accommodate with what is preferable for the elders in regard to church organization. “Sometimes you just have to have more informal meetings when you get together with your elders around a meal and just talk church and leadership.” A pastor simply needs to keep his ears open to listen and his mind open to think about what he hears from his cross-cultural elders. Also, he should be open to *doing* things differently if he hears his elders expressing that something different will work within their culture.

III. Seek advice and criticism

“Find the people who will be patient with you. Find the people who will tell you what you need to know.” A pastor does not know what he does not know about another culture until he is told what he does not know. When a pastor looks for elders in a cross-cultural setting, he should look for men who will tell him what he is doing wrong when he communicates to the other culture. As the cross-cultural leaders said earlier, sometimes another culture will not be willing to give a white pastor criticism. One pastor advised: “Keep yourself in touch with the elders. Communicate with them. Establish a relationship with them.” In order to build a trust that breeds open advice and criticism, a pastor needs to set up an open line of communication with his elders. This will allow the pastor to speak among his elders in a way that encourages them to bring advice and criticism to him.

Another way for the pastor to get open advice and criticism from cross-cultural elders is to make a habit of taking them with him on visits to members, prospects, and delinquents. “Make sure to take the elders with you on visits whenever you can. You can really get to know them on those trips to the hospital or a member’s home.” When a pastor goes on visits with the elders, he opens himself up to them. The elders not only grow as they train with the pastor, but

they can also see him working in another setting – applying the gospel to individual souls in various situations. When they see the way he speaks and relates to their culture in these visits, they can offer him advice about how to speak the gospel in a way which resonates with their culture.

IV. Potpourri advice

Today it is likely that most pastors will be in a setting where multiple cultures are represented. Conflict will arise even in a mono-cultural setting. When cultural differences are involved, conflict can take on an elevated attitude. “When conflict arises between cultures, find good, sensible leaders on both sides. Get them *together* in a small group and talk it out.” It is important to let the cultural leaders see each others’ side, and understand where each group is coming from with their concerns.

“Cross-cultural leadership takes a lot of work. You may find yourself stretched thin at times. Make the *big* things a priority – worship, sermons, showing the people you care.” When a pastor is blessed to have leaders who help in various parts of the ministry, he can equip them for work in greater parts of the congregation. Before that time comes, it is helpful for the pastor to focus on parts of his ministry that affect his people directly the most – like preaching, teaching, and visiting.

“Keep in mind that some cultural differences may be attributed more to poverty or class than to ethnicity and race.” Pastors must be aware of over-generalizing the culture they are serving. The best way to avoid doing so is to speak with the elders and get to know them. By doing this, a pastor can identify the differences between their personality traits and their cultural traits.

“Consider learning from another pastor in the area. Go to a church where the other culture is dominant and the pastor is (from that same) culture. What can you learn? Get ideas from the pastors – they know the culture in the area.” A pastor serving in an African American community said he would take time to visit the African American Baptist church in his community. He did this so he could see how the African American pastor spoke to his members. He also wanted to see what their worship was like. He wanted to learn from the pastor about the community he was serving and what the leadership was like in the community.

V. Conclusion

“Developing leaders takes a *long* time – and usually longer than you have the patience for. And you’re probably going to be tempted to think: ‘I can just do this more quickly on my own.’ Don’t push developing leaders down on your list.” There is no way around it, developing elders is a very time-consuming part of ministry. In a cross-cultural setting, it will take even more time. Developing relationships with cross-cultural elders will take more time in order to cross the cultural bridges. When a trusting relationship is established with the cross-cultural elders, the pastor can get criticism and insight into how he can better serve the culture. When a relationship is established, the leaders can grow together with the pastor in Christ, in order to work for the glory of the kingdom of God.

5. CONCLUSIONS

What conclusions can be taken from Scripture about elders and the advice given from cross-cultural leaders and pastors? To begin with, the description of elders and their work leading God's people in the Bible makes it clear how important it is for pastors and overseers to lead alongside the elders in their congregations. This was reinforced by the leaders and pastors who emphasized how beneficial it is for the church to have elders who help lead the congregation with the pastor. Since elder leadership in the church is vital, pastors will want to identify elders whom they can train and develop in the Word of God. The Lord tells us in the Bible that he wants elders who will lead according to his established qualifications. These qualifications are recorded in places like 1 Timothy 3, Titus 1, and 1 Peter 5. The leaders and pastors spoke to this subject several times. They made it clear that development around God's Word keeps God's mission before both pastors and elders so they can grow and work together for the Kingdom of God.

Implications become evident for church leadership between pastors and elders today when examining biblical leaders like Moses and the apostles. Moses and the apostles were men sent by God to lead his people. But God did not want them to lead by themselves. For that reason, they chose elders to lead alongside them. In the New Testament, Paul made sure to encourage and train the elders in God's Word as their leader. Neither Moses nor the apostles held their leadership over the elders, but treated them as fellow leaders. Yet, they were recognized as the leaders sent by God to equip the elders for leadership. The pastors and cross-cultural leaders spoke of this relationship modeled in their congregations. The elders helped the pastor lead the church, recognizing that the pastor was called by God to be their leader. But they were also able to help the pastor by teaching him about evangelizing their culture and community.

Churches throughout the ages have recognized the importance of elder leadership and established their own office of elders. The office of an elder is not something that is prescribed in Scripture. Scripture does not command exactly how to set up the office of elders. Scripture does not restrict certain age groups from being elders. Scripture does not give exact roles for elders to fill. For these reasons, there is no need for precise criteria about what an elder can or cannot do within the church. Yet, in cross-cultural settings, pastors may have a hard time

breaking from the traditional roles of a WELS elder. Scripture assures pastors they have liberty to work with elders to find their own roles. This is because of the freedom pastors have in developing the elders' office in their own individual settings and circumstances. This application was made evident in a practical way by the cross-cultural leaders who talked about filling roles that were needed within their culture, instead of sticking to a traditional organization and structure.

The widespread roles of elders in Scripture allow the roles of elders in a church today to be set up according to the needs of the church. Yet it can still be hard for pastors to be open-minded about breaking with the traditional roles of a WELS elder. Scripture shows that the apostles met with and discussed church issues with their elders in order to come to a God-pleasing decision about what to do.⁸¹ The cross-cultural leaders and pastors emphasized that communication plays a key role in development and working together in the church. From this a pastor can learn that growth around God's Word along with open communication and understanding can lead him and his elders to discover what roles might be utilized for God-pleasing leadership among the cross-cultural elders.

⁸¹ Concerning the circumcision for gentiles issue in Acts 15

6. APPLICATION

So what do the conclusions drawn above mean for a pastor called to a cross-cultural community? First and foremost, they demonstrate that a pastor will want to look for elders from among the culture he is serving. The pastor is theologically trained to teach and preach God's Word. But he will need help working in a culture with which he is unfamiliar. This is where the elders from that culture prove invaluable. They can serve as cultural guides for the pastor as they seek to serve the community, while also shepherding the flock alongside the pastor. But how can pastors get elders from another culture to serve and lead with them in their congregation? Where do they begin?

I. Search the Community

The elders chosen in the Old Testament and New Testament were respected and wise men. Moses and the apostles looked for men who were known as leaders and had leadership qualities. How can a pastor look for such men today? It begins by hitting the streets. A pastor should get to know his neighborhood by knocking on doors, speaking to local businesses, and attending community events. While doing this, he can keep his eyes and heart open to look for men who are recognized as leaders within the community. Once he has identified such men, his next step is to evangelize them. Speak the gospel in love. Explain the mission of the congregation – to reach the lost in the community. A pastor must be open about what he is looking for: men who can help him evangelize the community because they know the culture and have a heart for the gospel.

II. Establish a relationship

In order for a pastor to show prospective elders he is serious about reaching out to their culture, he must become a part of the elders' lives. As a pastor searches his community for men who are leaders, he will begin to get a feel for what is important to the community – concerns, events, and issues. But a pastor should not think he can determine what is important to his new culture on his own, but instead use the elders as cultural guides. A pastor can ask them if what he perceives to be important truly represents the way the culture thinks. The elders are able to tell the pastor whether he is right or wrong. When the pastor discovers from them what is

important, he should make it clear he wants to be involved in what is important to the cross-cultural community.

The pastor can establish a relationship with his cross-cultural elders by attending important community events with them. He can organize get-togethers with their friends and families. The time the pastor spends together with the cross-cultural elders will allow the elders and the pastor to discover their cultural differences. This will establish trust and open up communication between them. Once there is an open line of communication, the pastor can begin asking his elders hard and revealing questions, like: What am I doing wrong in communicating to you and your culture? How can I contextualize the presentation and application of the gospel in this culture? What do I need to be aware of when we visit prospective members? Open dialogue creates a trusting relationship among pastors and elders. It demonstrates to the elders that the pastor loves them and wants to work with them to save souls in their community.

III. Train in the Word

In order to continue moving the elder-pastor relationship forward, the pastor must keep all men involved in God's truth. This keeps them focused on the unity of Christ, rather than any cultural differences. The pastor has been theologically trained to distinguish law and gospel and protect God's truth in pure doctrine. His elders have taught him about the cultural differences in the community and how he can serve their culture. Now the pastor will want to teach his elders how they can apply the pure truths of God's Word to evangelize the community and nurture the congregation.

While training in the Word, the pastor will work to develop his elders in the qualifications the Lord desires of his leaders. This can include Bible studies on topics such as: how to lead a family like Christ leads his church, how to be patient when dealing with others and how to serve humbly. While studying Scripture together, the pastor can also learn from the cross-cultural elders about how he can apply scriptural principles when communicating to his new community. Studying the Bible together will grow faith and trust in Christ so that pastor and elders trust each other and each others' motives. While training in the Word, the pastor can also take the elders on visits so they both learn from each other about applying the gospel to the

community. Of course, training in the Word is never finished. The pastor and elders will continue to meet at Jesus' feet in order to keep them focused on working for the glory of his kingdom.

IV. Establish Roles and Goals

When a trusting relationship built on God's Word and open communication have been established, the pastor and elders can focus on what roles the elders should fill. They will have spoken about the needs, cares, and concerns of their culture to the pastor. Together, now the pastor and elders will want to talk about how they can best address those needs to serve the gospel to the community. Going into a cross-cultural community, a pastor may recognize there will be different roles available for cross-cultural elders, but on his own he will not be able to recognize what those roles will be. Working together, the pastor and elders can discover what these roles might be. The pastor must also make it clear he is utilizing the elders according to the community's needs and the elders' own gifts. He will let them know that just because there may be different roles among them, it does not reflect a difference in their value to the church.

V. Final Advice/Reminders

While establishing cross-cultural elders, the pastor will want to make it evident to the elders that he is not holding his office as pastor over them. He will want to explain that they are leading the community and congregation together around the gospel of Christ, who is Savior of all nations.

The main thing to remember when establishing cross-cultural elders is to listen. Have an open and loving heart that is willing to compromise one's own culture – but not God's truth – in order to better spread that truth to a different culture. When a pastor listens and has an open heart and mind regarding the needs for leadership, he can establish a trusting relationship with his elders. With that trusting relationship, the pastor and elders can together explore the needs of their community's culture in light of Scripture. Then they can meet the needs and address them together. By doing this they can establish roles for the elders which fit the context and culture of the church. But this is easier said than done. Pastors may agree to these principles, but they can be hard to put into practice. It is hard for men of one culture to break from that culture. Therefore it can be difficult for WELS pastors to break from what they are used to, and work for

“different” roles of elders with their new culture. As encouragement to do this, a pastor can look to the situation in Acts 6 and see how the new roles developed there helped the vitality of the early Christian church.

When a pastor has been blessed with elders from the culture of his community, he should give much thanks to the Lord. Such men will be a priceless asset to the congregation, and will help the pastor work toward strengthening souls in the new culture which he serves. With the help of elders from another culture, the pastor and elders together can “become all things to all men so that by all possible means (they) might save some” (1 Co 9:22). Their work together certainly allows them to “go and make disciples of all nations” (Mt 28:19) even right in the community surrounding their church in North America.

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